

Chapter Eight -- Around the Churn.

A farm woman with a family seldom finds time hanging heavy on her hands, even if she's as peart as Grandma Stafford's Grandma Turner. She was a little slip of a woman who never weighed a hundred pounds in her life, but lived to be ninety. They used to tell us she could pick up an anvil by the horn, which takes a lot of grip, an' on the day she was eighty she jumped up an' cracked her heels together three times before she hit the floor. She never walked to her work: she'd run to her load, an' walk back with it.

Mother wasn't quite such a worker as that, but she kept busy most of the time. So when churning time came, you'd find us young'uns clustered around her, coaxing for stories. We generally got 'em, too.

But nothing started till she had all her ducks in a row.

The milk had been turning in the churn for a day or two, and if it was winter⁴ time it would be close to the fire, for the butter comes better when the milk has formed a good, hard clabber. Of course there was a solid lid on the churn, to keep out dust, with a cloth under it and hangin' down the sides just to make sure none got in.

Mother would have the bigger children get the churn out to a handy place without spilling the milk. Then she'd get down the dasher an' dasher lid from their nail, an' scrub 'em good an' clean. The dasher was a round stick, maybe a yard long, with

crossed boards at the bottom, reachin' out nearly to the sides of the churn. The dasher lid had a round hole in the middle, to let the dasher rod work up an' down. And Mother'd put a cloth over the lid, an' wrap it loosely around the dasher rod, to keep dust from gettin' in, an' the milk from splashin' out.

Then she'd begin to work the dasher up an' down -- just out of the top of the milk, an' then down nearly to the bottom of the churn. She'd make slow strokes, not quite one a second, ker-chunk, ker-chunk, ker-chunk! An' because churnin' is slow, tiresome business, she'd tell us stories to pass away the time.

There were a lot of 'em, an' our favorite was the Long Story of the Punkin House, but she didn't often tell it, because it was so long it took more time than a churnin', unless the butter was mighty slow. It was about a boy who loved a fairy princess, and made her a house out of a pumpkin shell, and lined it with butterflies' wings. Because it was so long, Mother was more likely to tell us a story like the one about the old grandfather rat and the cheese:

Once upon a time there was an old grandfather rat who lived in a house and had led all the other rats for many years. But one night he got his leg caught in a trap.

He sent word to all the other rats to come and see him, because he wanted to give them his last word, and tell them good-bye. And all the rats gathered around him, wailing and telling him how sorry they were that he was going to die.

Grandfather Rat made them a speech. He told them to learn a lesson from him and never go near a trap, and a lot of other things, and the rats all stood around him and wept.

"Now it will soon be dawn," said Grandfather Rat, "and you will all have to leave me to my fate. But before I go, there is one thing I want to tell you."

"What is it, O Grandfather?" they asked.

"My children," he said, "I want to make you a last gift, for I know where you can find some cheese."

Then all the rats quit weeping, and pricked up their ears, and wiggled their whiskers, and said: "Cheese! Cheese!"

"Yes," my children," said Grandfather Rat, "I know where there is a whole cheese that you can get."

"Tell us, Grandfather, tell us," all the rats cried.

"I will tell you," said Grandfather Rat. "But first I want all of you to stay with me till dawn, since I am caught in this trap and they will come to kill me in the morning."

But the rats clustered around him, and showed their fangs, and told him: "We don't care what is going to happen to you. We want to know where that cheese is. And if you don't tell us, we will kill you, ourselves."

"Well," said old Grandfather Rat, "I will tell you now. But please stay with me till dawn."

"We will," promised the rats.

"That cheese," said Grandfather Rat, "is upstairs in the attic in a big, brown box, and you'll have to gnaw a hole into the box."

But before he finished speaking, the rats were running for the attic, pell-mell, pricking up their ears, and wiggling their whiskers, and muttering, "Cheese, cheese!"

After they were gone, old Grandfather Rat looked around, and there was just one young rat left, still weeping.

"Son," he asked, "why didn't you go up to the attic with the rest of them, to get the cheese?"

"O Grandfather," sobbed the young rat, "I am so sad about your having to die that I don't care about the cheese."

"Don't feel too bad," said Grandfather Rat. And he gave a couple of pulls, and slipped his leg right out of the trap.

"Come along with me, son," he said. "I'll show you where that cheese really is!"

In churning you beat the milk with the dasher till the butter separates from the rest of the liquid, and rises to the top of the churn, where it can be dipped off. But it wouldn't be ready by the time Mother had told one story, even a longer one than about Grandfather Rat. So we'd ask her for another one. And we were always happy if it turned out to be "Where's My Big Toe?"

Once upon a time there were an old man and an old woman, and they lived together in a house away off by themselves. And one day they weren't going to have anything for supper but some cream, when a neighbor came by.

"Old man," he said, "old man, what are you going to have for supper?"

And the old man said: "Just some cream."

"If you'll go over to my place," said the man, "you can pick yourselves a mess of beans."

So the old man and the old woman started over to the neighbor's house to pick their beans. And everybody they met would ask them:

"Old man, old man. What are you going to have for supper?"

And the old man would say: "Cream and beans."

And they'd ask the old woman: "Old woman, old woman. What are you going to have for supper?"

And she'd say: "Cream and beans."

But while they were picking the beans, all at once the old woman looked down on the ground, and said: "Old man, old man. Come here and tell me what this is I've found."

The old man came and looked at it, and he said: "That's a bear's toe."

"Oh, goody," said the old woman. "We can cook it with the beans."

So they picked the beans and started home. And everybody they met would say:

"Old woman, old woman. What are you going to have for supper?"

And the old woman would say: "Cream, and beans, and a bear's toe."

And they'd ask the old man: "Old man, old man. What are you going to have for supper?"

And the old man would say: "Cream, and beans, and a bear's toe."

So they went home, and cooked the beans and the bear's toe, and ate it, and drank the cream, and went to bed.

But away along in the middle of the night they woke up, and there was something going round and round the house, saying:

"Where's my big toooooo? Where's my big toooooo? Where's my big toooooo?"

"Old man, old man," said the woman. "Get up and go out all round the house, and see what that is."

So the old man got up, and went out and went all round the house, and didn't see a thing. So he came back to bed.

But pretty soon it started again: "Where's my big tooooc? Where's my big tooooc? Where's my big tooooc?"

"Old woman, old woman," said the old man. "Get up and go out and go all round the house, and see what that is."

So the old woman got up and went out and went all around the house, but she didn't see a thing. So she came back to bed.

Pretty soon they heard it again: "Where's my big tooooc? Where's my big tooooc? Where's my big tooooc?"

"Old man, old man," said the old woman. "There must be something there. Get up and go out and go all round the house, and see what it is."

So the old man got up, and went out, and went all round the house, but he didn't see a thing. And then he came in and looked up the chimney.

And there was a great big thing, with great big eyes, and a great big nose, and great big teeth, and great big paws, and a great long tail, and great big claws.

The old man looked at it for a minute, and then he asked:

"What's those eyyyes for?"

"To look you throuunngh with."

"What's that noooooose for?"

"Smell your bloood with."

"What's those teeeeth for?"

"Crunch your boooones with."

"What's those paaaaws for?"

"Dig your graaave with."

"What's that taaail for?"

"Sweep your graaaave with."

"What's those claaaws for?"

"TEAR YOU UP."

The last words came out loud and strong, with a quick jump that never failed to make us nearly jump out of our own skins, no matter how used we were to the story.

By that time, maybe, the butter would have gathered, and Mother would skim it off with a spoon, into a dish, and pour water on it, and work it with a fork, and pour it off. And that would go on till all the sour milk was washed out, for that is what makes butter get strong right away. If you wash it well and salt it, butter will stay sweet and fresh for a week or more, even in hot weather without ice. And if you weight it down and keep it under salt water, it will keep for a month.

After the butter was put away, Mother would empty the buttermilk out of the churn into a crock or a pitcher, and wash the churn. And then, if we'd been good, there would be a glass of fresh buttermilk for us to drink.

Later on I got to like it better after it got sour enough to taste sharp. But when I was a little feller I thought nothing in the world was better than a glass of buttermilk, right out of the churn.

Most of the places we lived had open fireplaces instead of stoves for heating, and they could be very nice. One of my ~~very~~ early recollections is of toasting a half biscuit, on the end of a poker, close up to the coals. But there were hazards, too. A burning stick might break and throw hot coals out on the hearth or beyond onto the wood floor. If a child stood too close the draft might pull in and set fire to a skirt or nightgown. I, with three others to watch, was the only one of us four who never caught fire, thought none were hurt. I remember the story of Walter's nightgown being fully ablaze before Father could reach him, and how Father ~~caught~~ caught the neckband with two fingers and ripped the garment away. The only damage was to the gown, but the blaze singed off one side of his beautiful curls, so they gave him his first haircut. Father, of course, cut our hair, for lack of a barber or money to pay one.

There were outside fires, too, that had to be watched, to heat water for washing clothes or for ^{scalding and} scraping off the hair at hog-killing time. The fire would have melted the solder off the bottom of our one washtub, and for want of an iron pot we heated ~~the water~~ stones if the fire and putting them into the water until it boiled.

I can't remember our having more than one pig to kill at Mud Lick, though we may have had two one year. We fed them a little corn, but mostly on kitchen scraps and other slop. We never used soap in washing dishes, since the dishwater was fed to the pig.

Hog-killing was always done on a spell of settled cold weather, for if the air turned warm before the meat had time to take in the salt it would be a disaster. We had a scare once, but the threatened warm spell failed to develop.

Butchering was always a long, busy day, starting with the first daylight and the house being a beehive of activity till well into the night. Father would cut up the carcass as fast as possible, and lay down the hams, shoulders, sides of bacon, jowls well rubbed and coated with salt. The tenderloin could also be salted, but backbones, spare ribs and organs such as liver, kidneys and sweetbreads had to be cooked and eaten as soon as possible to prevent spoiling. So, along with the work we ate a lot of meat at hog-killing time.

Scraps were ground up into sausage^{rubbed sage,} and cured with salt, red and black pepper and packed away. Fat and leaf lard were cut up into bits and rendered into lard. This was a long process needing constant attention lest it should scorch and hurt the flavor. The "rendering" into lard had to continue until not any trace of moisture remained, which would have caused the lard to sour later on. Some of the sausage or tenderloin or both would be fried, put down in crocks and well covered with hot lard, which would keep it good till well into the following summer. Lard is a marvelous preservative, and if properly boiled out it will not become rancid for a year or more.

Since the store at Volga didn't sell anything perishable and no one in the district would risk killing beef or veal, for lack of buyers, chicken was about our only other meat.

After the chicken's head had been chopped off or its neck wrung in two, the body was allowed to flop around on the grass until all the blood had run out. Then it was scalded, all the feathers picked off, and then singed to remove the hairs. Then there was a certain routine to follow.

First the wings were cut off and folded neatly for cooking. Next off came the feet, the drumsticks and the thighs in that order, leaving just the body. Then with the back down the pulleybone was carefully removed so as not to break it, since we kids always wanted to pull it, which ever one got the short end got to make a wish. Then with the breast down, cuts were made under the flat bones (equivalent to our shoulder blades) ~~####~~ and they were taken off together with the bones to which they were attached. Turning the body first one way and then the other the rib tips were cut free of the breast bone, and the muscle cut so that the back and breast would come apart. The breast was ready for cooking, but this left the back, which was severed just behind the ribs, the front part then being called the rack.

The entrails were removed and discarded, except the gizzard, which was trimmed, cut open, emptied and the lining removed. (Some people saved and dried the linings for "chicken gizzard tea," said to be good for indigestion. We never ate the lungs, but did save the heart and kidneys.

This left the head and feet. The head (with any attached neck, was skinned and cut off just behind the beak. In addition to the brain it provided a nice morsel of several bites. The feet, which had been well scalded, were skinned. There wasn't much meat on yhem, but they added flavor to the gravy, whether stewed or fried.

Towards the end of winter, after we had eaten the last of the few cabbages Father had "holed up," we would begin to get very hungry for some kind of vegetables, and as soon as spring began to break Mother would take us out picking greens. The earliest would be dandelion, whose leaves we could wilt with hot grease, or sometimes eat raw as a sandwich between buttered halves of biscuit. Later, but well before anything in the garden began to come in, dandelion was still the mainstay, along with sour dock, wild lettuce, wild mustard, ^{lamb's quarter,} and things she called blue thistle and white top, which I've never seen since. These could be boiled with a little salt pork, and helped prevent scurvy, I suppose.

We were poor as Job's turkey, but proud, and managed to stay clean, washing clothes with nothing but hot water, a washboard and homemade soap, made by boiling lard ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ lye, made by leeching water through wood ashes from the fireplace. We bathed regularly, too, and had to have our hands and faces clean and hair combed before coming to the table.

Since I was too young to handle this very well, Walter and Shirley were usually entrusted with this chore, which they performed with vigor and not always too gently. I remember arguing that the order to wash my hands and face didn't include other afeas, so that at last the direction was to wash my "hands, face, neck and ears." Shirley used to lecture me on being stubborn, saying that my children would inherit that characteristic even worse than I displayed it. She kept this up even into my high school days.